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THE BIG THAW

BY SHIFRA PAIKIN ABRAMSON
GOOD FORTUNE Israel Bureau



My grammar school years were marked by periodic bomb drills — rehearsals for an event we hoped would never take place — in which the entire student body was marched down to the basement, where we stood lined up against the wall until the all-clear signal sounded. While these occasional excursions were no doubt more memorable for relieving the tedium of the classroom than for instilling a fear of nuclear attack, my father's regular fulminations against the Communists, who had taken over his native Russia and wiped out every vestige of Judaism, most definitely imbued me with an abhorrence for the Soviet

Union.

And although his confident predictions of the demise of the Soviet Empire sounded fanciful at the time, he has, in this as in so many other areas, indeed been proved correct. For today, after more than seventy years of extraordinary efforts to extricate Judaism, religious institutions have begun to sprout like grass after rain in the republics of the former Soviet Union. And now, even in remote Siberia, the frigid region that has perhaps come more than anything else to symbolize the cruelty and the repression of the Soviet regime, Jewish communal life has begun to emerge, phoenix-like, from the ashes of destruction.

The revitalization of Judaism in Siberia is in no small measure due to the efforts of the Jerusalem-based Shvut Ami Center for Russian Jews — which trains native Russian-speakers for outreach work among their compatriots. When the Center's shaliach, 28-year-old Rabbi Yehuda Weissler, arrived in Novosibirsk, Siberia's capital, in December 1993, he was not prepared for what awaited him. For although he had just come from Kiev, where he was running the yeshiva, the contrast between the two places was startling: Arriving in Siberia from the Ukraine brought almost the same culture shock as arriving in the Ukraine from the West.

Siberia's Jews Four Years After Communism's Meltdown



(The farther that Jews were from the West the more disconnected they were from their past and their heritage.) Many of the 15,000 Jews in Novosibirsk (which has an intermarriage rate of over 90 percent) thought that Judaism didn't exist any more.

Nevertheless, Rabbi Weissler found the remnants of what had once been a Jewish community. An elderly Jew he met, Reb Mendel, who had been drafted into the Red army at age 20 and sent to Siberia, begged him to try to rebuild a proper Jewish community. "After over 50 years of being forced to live like a *goy*, the Jewish spark inside him still glows," Rabbi Weissler wrote

back to Jerusalem.

Rabbi Weissler started holding lectures on basic Judaism. He established a *shul*, with a regular Shabbos minyan followed by dinner. For the elderly participants, the weekly get-together brought back memories. "It is amazing," the rabbi noted, "to see how Jews who have been married to non-Jews all their lives are moved to tears on remembering a Shabbos at home, whether in Minsk, Berditchev, or Novhardok."

Heartwarming stories of Jewish resilience abound in Siberia. An 80-year-old woman in Novosibirsk, Basya Kutzinov, never married because she could not be certain of the Jewishness of prospective husbands. Now

she lived alone, with her 20 cats for company. As a young girl, Basya saw her father, the rabbi of Vladivostok, murdered before her eyes for refusing to work on Shabbos. Due to the absence of a local *shochet*, she has not tasted meat for over 50 years. She has only one tooth left in her mouth; as her other teeth rotted and crumbled, Basya refused to have them treated because in the Siberian capital, dentists work only on Saturday.

And there's Reb Yeshaya, who was sent from the Ukraine to work in Siberia at age 15. Upon entering the *shul*, he recited aloud *Hamalach Hagoel*. When asked why, he explained that before he left

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BIG THAW

home, his father has begged
him not to forget he was
Jewish. To this day, not a
single day passes that he
doesn't say *Modeh Ani* and
Hamalach Hagoel. "Un mit
does bin ich geblieben a
Yid." — that is how I
remained a Jew — he states
simply.

Rabbi Weissler has set up
a kollel, where nine men of
various ages are devoting
themselves full-time to Torah
study. They started with the
alef beis, proceeded to Jewish
thought, history, *Chumash*,
and Hebrew, and are now
studying *mishna*. With the
help of Rabbi Reuven
Gardner of France, an expert
in *mikvaot*, a public bath
house has been converted
into a *mikvah* — the first in
Siberia in 50 years.

Dubbed the "chief rabbi"
of Siberia, Rabbi Weissler
rides the circuit to other
Jewish communities in
Siberia — Barnaul, Omsk,
Tomsk, Kemorva, Irkutsk,
Birobidjan, Novokznetz,
Chabarovsk. They have a
total of some 100,000 Jews,
mostly refugees from
Lithuania and White Russia,
but also some from the Asian
Republics. Virtually all now
have organized prayers every
Shabbos and some
semblance of Jewish life. He
has also been arranging
circumcisions, bringing in
mohelim from England or
other places.

Rabbi Weissler recently
arranged a circumcision in
Omsk, which was widely
publicized as the first public
bris performed on an eight-
day old baby since the
Bolshevik Revolution. It was
heralded in the local
newspaper and on television
as a historic event. The rabbi
made an urgent request to
arrange a visa for a
Manchester *mohel*, Rabbi
Shmuel Goldberg. Although
it usually takes two weeks,
a sympathetic Russian
official at the embassy
expedited the process with
the assistance of London's
Russian Immigrant Aid
Fund. Rabbi Goldberg flew
to Moscow, and proceeded to
Omsk by car. The ceremony
took place in the *shul*, a small
wooden building heated by
an open wood fire. The older
men, who had despaired of
ever witnessing a *bris* again,
wept.

Reb Gershon, 70 years old,
had been yearning for a *bris*
for a long time. But when the
mohel came, he discovered
that Gershon had been
circumcised as a baby but
never knew it. His parents

BIG THAW

evidently had the *bris*
performed secretly but were
too frightened to ever tell him.

The first time Gershon
came to Shabbos services
and saw the dinner table, he
began to weep. He explained
that the last time he saw
anything like that was almost
60 years ago. Every Friday
night, all the adults would
gather in their home and go
inside a room for a few hours.
He did not know what took
place behind the closed doors
because children were not
allowed to enter. Once he
caught a glimpse, but never
dared to ask for an
explanation. But when he
saw the set Shabbos table all
these many years later, he
remembered it immediately.
In Tomsk, Rabbi Weissler

He showed me his
tallis and tefillin which
he puts on every day.
He explained that he
only eats kosher meat.
But when I asked him
how he arranged
shechita, he didn't know
what I was talking
about. For more than 60
years he has been
meticulously kashering
non-kosher meat.

met 90 year-old Reb Chaim.
Originally from Kotz, from a
family of Kotzker Chassidim,
he was sent to Siberia alone
at age 13. Rabbi Weissler
visited him in his small
wooden one-room cabin with
a little log fire and no
running water. "I noticed
that he had some old *seforim*
and he told me he learns
chumash with *Rashi* every
single week. He showed me
his *tallis* and *tefillin* which
he puts on every day. He
explained that he only eats
kosher meat. But when I
asked him how he arranged
shechita, he didn't know
what I was talking about.
For more than 60 years he
has been meticulously
kashering non-kosher meat.
As I left, he begged me to
perform *tahara* on him after
his death."

Thanks to his position,
Rabbi Weissler was permitted
to visit the Siberian Gulag,
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completely surrounded by a
fifteen-foot high concrete wall
with armed guards in
watchtowers every couple of
hundred meters. Although I
was apprehensive, I was not
prepared for the sight which
met my eyes. A couple of
hundred skeletal beings,
mostly with shaved heads,
dressed in filthy ragged
uniforms, many with open
sores on their faces, watched
me through large, staring eyes.

"Their bed was a rag on
the concrete floor. Sanitation
consisted of a hole in the
ground outside. The dirt and
the stench was indescribable.
There is no heating — even
in winter when the
temperature reaches minus
35 degrees. This scene, so
comparable to the sights of
the concentration camps, will
be printed in my mind
forever.

"I was then taken to the
prison 'club room' (a hall with
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the Jewish prisoners for
almost an hour. I told them
about the Asseres Hadibros
and that however low a Jew
falls, he will always remain
a Jew, and Hashem will
always love him. I explained
to them... that if one believes
in G-d, one gains strength
and can withstand all tests.
It is never too late to repent
for one's sins. The gated of
teshuvah never close.

"The impact I had on them
was clearly visible. About 15
of them came to speak to me.
Every one of them told me
that it is the first time since
their imprisonment that they
felt that someone cared for
them and they had been
spoken to warmly and in a
civilized manner. Most of
them told me that when they
are free they will want to find
out more about their religion
and their origins. My visit to
give chizuk to these pitiful
beings with Yiddisheh
neshomos was such a
humbling experience, I shall
never forget it."

Rabbi Weissler's words
have brought more than a
few tears to those of us in
Israel who regularly read his
reports. Confronted with
such stories, one can only
marvel at the stubborn
tenacity and indomitable
spirit that kept alive a faint
Jewish spark to light the
darkness of the Communist
regime — and which is now
being fanned into a softly-
glowing flame. □